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SUBJECT: ELECTION: NO CLEAR LEADER IN WESTERN PROVINCE

11. (SBU) With election day a scant five weeks away, none of the presidential candidates has a clear lead in Western Province. Provincial leaders and local politicians (who owe their positions to ruling party largesse and connections), told emboffs that Acting President Rupiah Banda would easily take Western Province in the October 30 presidential by-election. However, a cross-section of Western voters do not agree. Although Michael Sata's support base is relatively small, he has not yet begun campaigning in Western Province. United Party for National Development (UPND) Hakainde Hichilema's message seems to resonate with educated voters; others seem supportive of "anyone but Banda."

12. (SBU) The Lozi King or "Litunga" has enormous influence over the population of Western Province, a culturally distinct and remote part of Zambia. During Charge's recent audience with the Lutunga, the Barotse monarch motioned to his cabinet and reported "when people want to know for whom to vote, they ask these men." Several contacts in the provincial capital Mongu told Charge that "the palace had already spoken--we are to vote for Hichelema," but when approached to confirm this, a close advisor to the King denied this: "We have not yet spoken." The King's advisors are unanimous in their disdain for the mercurial and populist Michael Sata. The King's Chief of Staff believes that Sata's Patriotic Front party will make few inroads in Western Province.

13. (U) During the 2001 presidential election, President Mwanawasa lost to UPND candidate Anderson Mazoka in Western Province, pulling in less than one-third of the vote. However, by 2006, Mwanawasa had reached an accommodation with the Lozi people and with the Litunga. The Barotse palace supported his re-election bid, and Mwanawasa won the province, taking over three-fourths of the vote. Local observers tell emboffs that MMD should not take Western Province support for granted this time; the 2006 votes were for Mwanawasa personally, not the ruling party.

14. (SBU) Strangely, the most popular presidential candidate among Embassy interlocutors was Finance Minister Magande. Emboffs reminded interlocutors--from Lozi ministers and NGO managers to restaurant staff and street vendors--that Magande is not a contender, having failed to secure the nomination of his party; this comment remarkably failed to dampen enthusiasm for the Finance Minister. Magande's popularity does not translate to support for the MMD's candidate, Acting President Rupiah Banda.

15. (SBU) Comment: Embassy interlocutors also expressed some wariness of electing another elderly leader. This reticence works against septuagenarians Sata and Banda. It seems logical that those who support and would wish to vote for Magande--a shrewd and articulate technocrat with excellent economic credentials--would find Hichilema the most attractive among the remaining choices. (Note: A senior UPND advisor told emboffs recently that part of Hichilema's election strategy is to appeal to would-be Magande voters.) Like Magande, Hichilema also hails from Southern Province, whose Tonga tribe traditionally enjoys strong affiliation

with the Lozi. The possibility (or misconception) that the Litunga has already proclaimed Hichilema the preferred candidate also provides UPND much needed momentum outside the urban, cosmopolitan "line of rail." Although a sparsely populated part of the country, Western Province's relevance in a potentially close election should not be discounted.

KOPLOVSKY